

COMMUNICATION IN LEADERSHIP: ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

INTRODUCTION:

Leaders have the primary responsibility of directing their subordinates towards goal-oriented targets. Except they understand the basics of communication they will fail in the realization of collective goals. So, they must know when to speak; what to speak about and with whom, where, when and in what situation. Their major problem is not necessarily linguistic correctness or the vogue for grammaticality but communicative competence. This work identifies effective human communication as the highway to the realization of organizational goals.

The art of communication involves the transmitting of messages from one person to the other. This explains why it is impossible for a normal human being to refuse to interact with his environment except he is dead; the interaction can be verbal or non-verbal, written or oral. Most living things have the natural ability to communicate, but human communication has acquired a distinct status because of its complex structure. Thus, human communication goes beyond just passing information to promoting social interaction among human beings within the society.

The transmission of messages from one social situation to another makes it imperative for people to enlarge their perception of social reality. This reality is what leaders should exploit for the implementation of collective ideals. The possibility of doing this depends on their ability to direct and mobilize their subordinates for

optimum result in set objectives. Nwamuo explains: "Leadership is the process of influencing the activities of an individual or group, in effort towards goals achievements in a given situation."¹

This is because every realistic vision has goals and objectives which should be accomplished through the support of others. Leaders, Nwamuo continues, have the responsibility of "inducing followers to act towards achieving or realizing certain goals that represent the values and motivations -- the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations -- of both leaders and followers".² whether they fail or succeed depend, to a large extent, on their ability to use effective communication in controlling the responses and reactions of their subordinates. This is why Bernard asserts that "the structure, extensiveness, and scope of organizations are almost entirely determined by communication."³

By implication, the climate of a particular organization is dictated by the nature of leadership applied in the running of the daily activities of the establishment. So, management theorists have postulated many leadership styles; all of which could be categorized under three major groups: the autocratic, democratic and laissez-faire. Autocratic or authoritarian leaders get people to do things without considering their situations while democratic leaders do everything within their power to encourage the participation of their followers in decision-making.

But laissez-faire leaders are weak and indeterminate. They prefer not to interfere with the actions of their subordinates because as leaders they lack focus and charisma. Instead of guiding the people in the actualization of set goals, they allow themselves to be carried away by the conflicting opinions and interests of their followers.

The most effective leaders in world history, experience has shown, are not necessarily authoritarian; they have not always been democratic and are never controlled by their subordinates. This is because leaders have the paramount responsibility of inducing their followers to utilize their maximum capabilities for the fulfilment of organizational goals. They achieve this not through coercion but the

people are persuaded to willingly identify and propagate collective vision. And since communication provides the fundamental structure for good administration, the failure of leaders to communicate effectively will pose a major threat to the actualization of collective goals.

The first step in addressing this problem is the creation of an organizational climate which will accommodate the different cultural backgrounds and exposures of the people without destroying the fundamental structure of the establishment. After the collapse of the classical theory of compelling workers to bow to expediency, an understanding of their needs and aspirations has become increasingly relevant to leaders if organizational targets must be realized. Therefore, it is necessary for those in leadership positions to create an atmosphere which will enable their followers to manifest their innate potentials. If the organizational climate is hostile and insecure, its leaders stand to lose; but there will be optimum achievement of set goals if the environment is supportive.

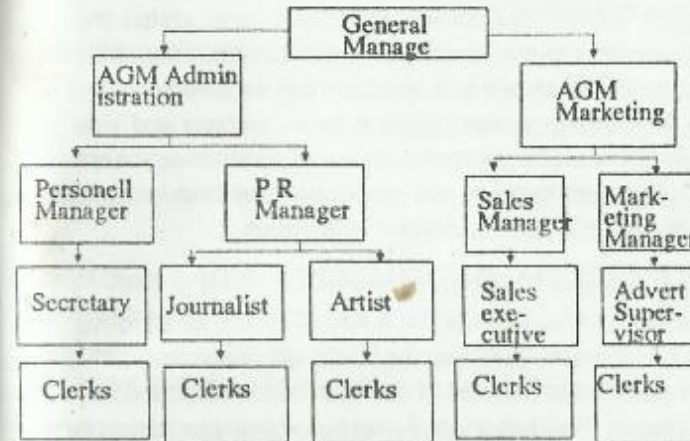
Consequently, it is pertinent for the leadership cadre to accept, circumstances notwithstanding, that communication is the bridge between leaders and followers. In fact, it is a major managerial function because it provides an avenue for nurturing and enhancing managerial effectiveness.

Leaders who are consistent in the art of communication cannot use the paraphernalia of executive powers to isolate themselves from the people that they are leading. An understanding of four things among many others, will help them to communicate effectively with the people they are leading;

- (i) The systems of communication
- (ii) Noise - the basic problem in communication
- (iii) Motivation and performance
- (iv) Conflict management and resolution.

We shall use the representation of power in the diagram below to

discuss these key concepts in communication and their relationship to the realization of organizational goals.



Communication Hierachy In Organization

The highest person in the hierachy of this establishment is the General Manager; followed by the Assistant General Managers. Managers, then Officers with supervisory functions while the clerical staff are at the bottom. It is important to ensure that the systems of communication, whether formal, informal or semi-formal, recognise the distribution of power to the three major groups (management, supervisors, Clerks) in this organization. The position of the General Manager - at the peak of the hierachy - has the tendency of isolating him from the clerks and vice versa; but management should endeavour to see that this natural possibility is not allowed to develop into a gulf. There is only one way of doing this and communication provides the avenue.

THE SYSTEMS OF COMMUNICATION

Leaders in management positions have a duty to keep the channels for disseminating information (upwards and downwards) open. Efforts should be made to ensure that as information moves down the hierachy, the people receive it with minimal or no distortion. Also, it is

necessary to see to it that officers with supervisory functions do not distill information as it flows upward. This will not only promote mutual interaction, it will create an opportunity for the leaders to feel the pulse of the followers. Besides, the horizontal media of communication among managers, supervisory officers and clerks could enrich the communication systems in any establishment if they are adequately used. And in fact, the mistrust which characterizes semi-vertical flow of information (from management - trade unions - workers and vice versa) might be minimized if the formal avenues of communication are not obstructed. Not even rumours and grapevine news from informal channels should instigate leaders to hoard information.

THE BASIC PROBLEM IN COMMUNICATION

Noise, Sybil James et al describe as, "a technical term for all forms of obstacles which conspire to reduce the fidelity of communication" ⁴ This "uninvited guest" is an element of communication introduced by Shannon and Weaver. We shall adopt these levels of categorization in discussing noise.

- Level A Physical — This includes loud sounds directly produced by man, electronics, vehicles, etc.
- Level B Psychological — This refers to slow mental state emotional imbalance, ill health, depression, fatigue, etc.
- Level C Linguistic — This reflects man's ability to use the resources of language, whether at the level of sounds, words or meanings.
- Level D Physiological — This has to do with deformities in the body (eyes, legs, face, or any kind of defect) which can constitute a problem or is regarded as a problem).
- Level E Mechanical — This refers to faults and depreciation

in equipment (telephone, computer, vehicles, etc) which can affect communication directly or indirectly.

- Level F sociological — This touches on socially accepted patterns of behaviour and their cultural implications. If an individual transfers them indiscriminately from one place to the other, they could obstruct communication.

Any of these or some of them could unite to conspire against effective communication. By inference, it is difficult, if not impossible to have an ideal decoder within the communication process. So leaders should be patient and considerate with their subordinates in such situations.

MOTIVATION AND PERFORMANCE

Motivation is extricably linked with quality production in any establishment. The fact that human needs are insatiable has created the situation where incentives will always enhance performance. This is because the people could have basic needs which directly affect their output and prevent capacity utilization. Also, most problems of inefficiency can be arrested if the workers are given adequate training in their job specifications. In an article "Handling 'People' Problems" McMurpy Pigeon-holes employees into three groups namely;

- A — People who are chronically lazy, careless and who lack initiative.
- B — The hypochondriacs and people with personality problems
- C — Those who resent the decisions of management. ⁵

Yet it is important to observe that the problems posed by each of these groups can be controlled if they are given the right kind of motivation. Excellence, for instance, should be rewarded because motivation has an inherent ability to increase performance.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND RESOLUTION

The people serving in any organisation are from different backgrounds and manifest diverse behavioural dispositions. At times, their areas of interest might generate conflicts so the duty of making them to work for collective vision is a task which leaders should overcome through the kind of relationship that they have with their subjects. This is because they are in a better situation to affect the lives of their subordinates, if they leaders are sensitive to their needs. Assuming a manager has a highly productive secretary who is very impatient, he has the choice of retaining or dismissing her. But in a situation where he needs her services, he should be ready to design an environment for her to function adequately.

Leaders should expect conflicts so they should be prepared to manage all kinds of conflicts. Silence is a cowardly approach while coercion proffers only short-term solutions. The best weapon for managing and resolving conflicts is effective communication. Uno^h has identified argumentation and persuasion as viable communication tools for handling human conflicts.⁶ Persuasive argumentation does not necessarily demand an eloquent knowledge of linguistic theories, neither does it emphasize chomsky's vogue for grammaticality. Rather, it concentrates on basic issues in communication raised in Lasswell's (1948) model, which was expanded by Bradock (1958) and popularized by Hymes (1971) in his discussion of communicative competence. The people in management positions are bound to relate with their subordinates and communication serves this purpose more than anything else. The idea of working together has given each group the opportunity of sharing in the needs and social experiences of the other party.

Those in authority should acquire a competence in communication which goes beyond just sending messages or giving instructions. Competence, Hymes defines as the ability to know "when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about, with whom, when, where, in what manner"⁷. Language is the main medium that leaders can use for meaningful communication. According to Traugott and Pratt, language is the most resourceful tool for controlling, creating and

manipulating the environment. This is because it is used in getting people to do things; and also enables them to make commitments.⁸

Language is the major avenue for propagating group vision since it adapts to social needs and the collective realities of the people. The story of the Tower of Babel is an interesting study on the relevance of language to collective vision. The partial success in constructing an highway to Heaven shows that nothing except GOD can abort a plan when there is united and concentrated vision. This is because human actions take into consideration the elaborate meanings of behaviour and its consequence(s). The issue here is that expediency in whatever form should not be delineated from human relations. This is why Cherry describes communication as a social affair.⁹

CONCLUSION

The perception of reality both in action and thought is determined by the people at the helms of affairs. English language, for example, was used by the British to colonize the mentality and aspirations of most African countries because of the nature of leadership utilized by the imperialists. After decades of political independence, the cumulative effect of Western paternal leadership which Esen calls the "OURS-IS-BAD-SYNDROME" is very much with us.¹⁰ As such leaders have a responsibility to be in-charge without being task-masters; and since they are not omnipotent in knowledge, their followers might not always be wrong.

Communication has the resources for directing and cultivating confidence in the people. So efficient leadership should utilize these resources for the management and resolution of human conflict. It is necessary, therefore, for leaders to ensure that the channels of communication are kept open. This is because good leadership cannot be isolated from the aspirations of the people and goals of the organization.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Authoritarian leaders, history has shown, have not always been successful. What are the communication problems inherent in such leadership?

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